

Four distinct Republicans vie for open House seat
By Laurence Arnold
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One has loads of money, one a famous name. One holds public office, while one knows his way around Capitol Hill. Four Republicans bring distinct strengths, and vulnerabilities, to the race for the first open House seat in New Jersey since 1996.

Mike Ferguson, the most prolific fund-raiser in the group, has been criticized for moving into the 7th District just to run for the seat vacated by Republican Bob Franks, a candidate for Senate.

Tom Kean Jr. carries his father's famous name but failed to turn that into organizational support in any of the four counties in the district.

***Patrick Morrisey** has been endorsed by congressmen with whom he worked on Capitol Hill but now must prove that translates to support from voters.*

And Assemblyman Joel Weingarten, who has experience in elected office, has been criticized for murky answers on abortion, an issue important in Republican primaries.

The upshot: a race too close - or too complicated - to call. Unlike the national Democratic party, which has picked Union County Manager Mike Lapolla as its favored candidate for the seat, the national Republican party is steering clear until 7th District Republicans choose a candidate on June 6.

On hot-topic issues, the candidates share much in common.

***Morrisey** and Weingarten support a flat-tax system, while Kean and Ferguson say they support something "flatter" than the current code. All favor school vouchers, at least experimentally in areas where public schools are failing. All support the idea of letting people invest part of their Social Security payroll taxes into a private investment account they would manage.*

Weingarten scored an organizational advantage when he won party endorsements in Union and Essex counties, giving him preferred ballot position in towns where 60 percent of the district's Republican voters live. Ferguson won the ballot lines in the other two counties, Somerset and Middlesex.

In many ways, the lightning rod in the race is Ferguson, 29, who ran two years ago in the neighboring 6th District against Democratic Rep. Frank Pallone.

Ferguson planned to take a second shot at Pallone this year. But after Franks announced plans to run for Senate, Ferguson moved from Red Bank to Westfield to launch a bid for the open seat.

Weingarten, in particular, has accused Ferguson of carpetbagging.

"I think Republicans are very distrustful of individuals who shop congressional districts and who feel that one size fits all," Weingarten said.

Ferguson, who has put \$200,000 of his own money into the campaign, replied that he and his wife switched districts with the encouragement of friends who wanted a strong Republican candidate in a crucial race for an open seat.

"I think people are less concerned about where you're from and more concerned about what you believe in," he said.

Ferguson has the support of state and national anti-abortion organizations and says he would support a constitutional amendment to ban abortion. The other abortion opponent in the field, **Morrisey**, says he would not support such an amendment.

Morrisey, 32, cut his political teeth in New Jersey but then moved to Washington, where he spent two years as health policy counsel for the House Commerce Committee. He moved back to Westfield to run for the House, stressing his firsthand knowledge of Capitol Hill.

"I think voters are starving for someone to talk substance and address the real concerns they have about health care, tax reduction, educational reform and fiscal sanity in Washington," **Morrisey** said. He has issued position papers on government spending, campaign finance reform, Medicare and education.

Rather than compete for endorsements from county organizations, **Morrisey** collected endorsements from more than 100 small-business owners and from 13 members of Congress who worked with him on Capitol Hill.

Much more than his opponents, **Morrisey** has collected money from political action committees and from individuals from other states - a reflection, he says, of his contacts from working at a nationwide law firm and in Congress.

Weingarten, 40, jokes that he is the old man in the race. He is also the only person with experience in elective office, having served on the Millburn Township Committee before joining the state Assembly.

"I'm the candidate in the race who has a record of getting things done," he said, boasting that he has voted 16 times to cut taxes as a state legislator (a claim shared by many Republicans who have served during the term of Gov. Christie Whitman).

Weingarten's position on abortion has come under scrutiny. While Ferguson and **Morrisey** are against abortion, and Kean favors abortion rights, Weingarten says only

that lawmakers should respect "current constitutional strictures" by not trying to overturn the 1973 Supreme Court decision, Roe vs. Wade, that legalized abortion.

On whether he supports abortion rights, Weingarten said: "I don't think my personal views are the issue."

Kean, 31, was the last candidate to begin unveiling positions on issues, rolling out a campaign finance reform plan last week that includes daily disclosure of his own contributors. His campaign announcements until then had focused on what big-name Republicans have endorsed him.

Kean acknowledges the importance of his family tree, saying he brings to the race "the benefit of positive name recognition." His father, Thomas H. Kean, was New Jersey's popular governor from 1982 to 1990. His grandfather, Robert W. Kean, served in the House from 1939 to 1959.

"The name brings with it a sense of honesty and integrity," Kean said.

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